Her Unwelcome Husband

By W. L. George

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For a moment Mrs. Caldecot submitted. She even slowly threaded her fingers through his; but as encouraged he stood up to take her into his arms she saw him look to the right and left. She did not mind his prudence—he owed her that—but his glance recalled to her the morning's scene, unchained the train of thought which it had bred. No, it couldn't be. Dreams might be the stuff that worlds are made of, but one couldn't make a new world out of an old dream. So, quite gently, she pressed a hand against his shoulder and pushed him away.

The mood of courage was still upon her at dinner, where she had to meet a Mr. and Mrs. Trent, who lived a few miles away, at Burleigh Abbas. Just as she had that evening done all she could to enhance her beauty, so now did she labor to exhibit her social graces, to laugh at Mr. Trent's elderly jokes, to grow interested in Mrs. Trent's daughter, Isabel Quadring, a social leader of whom she had heard a few hints which she did not impart to Mrs. Trent.

It seemed that Mrs. Trent had another daughter called Ursula, as to whom her mother was indefinite. Mrs. Caldecot was quick-minded enough to tell herself that Mrs. Trent had no luck with her daughters. So she laughed and induced conversation, was modestly racy and watchful to assist Mrs. Headcorn in dragging into the conversation anybody who tried to find time to eat.

She succeeded almost entirely, for a sort of despair seemed to have seized Rodbourne, who, on top of his sherry, was drinking claret at the rate of two glasses for every course. After a period of sulkiness he had begun to talk to Patricia, who was the only one whom Mrs. Caldecot could not quite move. But enough noise was made to cover her silence, and later, in the drawing room, Mrs. Trent occupied herself with the girl, taking a gentle interest in mutual friends and making her almost tearful by recommending marriage for everybody to any body as quickly as possible.

When the men came in and it was decided to play bridge, because everybody knew that otherwise they'd be bored before a quarter to eleven, Patricia at once declared that she was tired and wouldn't play. There was a determined scramble over the making up of the four; everybody offered to stand out—Mrs. Caldecot proving the most obstinate—while Mr. Trent wanted to cut out.

But suddenly she noticed that Rodbourne was not protesting; she realized that he wanted to play, that he was nervous of Patricia. A sort of rage came upon her; until then she had wanted to survive; now she wanted to precipitate her defeat. She wouldn't have him shirk, and so strong was her determination that when she took the pack the four submitted.

With a little laugh she shuffled and then cut. She replaced the pack so quickly that nobody noticed that at the bottom of the pack the cut had yielded a king. She spread the cards upon the table and all drew, but she managed for a second to get into Rodbourne's way. As she herself drew she pushed toward Rodbourne two cards, of which the king was the uppermost; he, of course, picked it up. He was highest. After a few protests against leaving out one of the two men the four sat down to play, and Rodbourne was forced by custom to go and talk to the odd girl.

The two did not at first say very much. Patricia was looking over a book of views of Venice, in which Rodbourne had to interest himself. They talked vaguely of Venice, Italy, places which Patricia had not visited. Rodbourne by degrees grew exasperated by the girl's silence, for she answered him only "yes" and "no" or "do you think so?"

At that moment he did not like her very much, but at last, as she felt that he was forcing her, as she thought there must be something false in this interest, she looked up at him. There was so much uncertainty, unhappiness in the bright blue eyes, that he, too, suddenly grew silent. That look seemed to say to him, "Why do you torture me? Why have you done me some harm I don't understand? You, a man, to a little girl like me?"

He felt guilty and glanced toward the bridge table to see if their confusion was observed; but, fortunately, at Cantrel Court bridge was played on the lines of a bargain sale, in the midst of controversy and denunciation; mistakes two hands old were dragged out and flung into the new one.

"I think it's clearing up," he said, looking toward the window. "I think I see the moon." Obediently Patricia looked toward the embrasure where the window was set. "Yes," said Rodbourne, getting up, "I don't think it's raining." He went toward the window; as if drawn by habit of response rather than by desire, Patricia followed him.

They were thus slightly isolated, for the embrasure jutted forward about three feet. For a moment they stayed there together, looking into the blackness of the night where the skyline was indicated only by a darkness almost as great. They were disturbed and did not know how to end their disturbance. Each wanted to speak, and each was afraid of saying something that mattered. So for some moments the tension grew, until at last the man, more active, more impatient, had to speak. "I say, they'll be hours over their rubber. Nobody's got a game yet. They're making such a noise."

"Yes, they are, rather," said Patricia, "and I've got such a headache."

"Well," said Rodbourne hesitating, "let's—why not go into the garden-room for a moment?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Do come. There's a fire."

"I think I ought to go to bed." said Patricia. As she said this she moved him. She was so pretty that night. She wore the sort of little frock which the dressmaker at Plymouth supplied to the backwoods of the county, a silly little frock of cream muslin, much too high both at the back and in front. And she had run something that looked like silver tape round the decolletage, giving a final touch of chastity to the skirt by interspersing rosebuds in the ruche at the bottom. And yet it wasn't hideous. It was innocent, childish. The cream enhanced the whiteness of the skin; the high decolletage brought out the slimness of the neck. She stood before him, her head a little thrown back, so very helpless that he felt once more that desire to protect her and make her happy. So strong did this grow that rather roughly he said again:

"Come along," and she followed him.

As soon as they reached the garden-room Patricia sat down before the fire, her hands clasped about her knees, and stared into the flames. Rodbourne did not sit down. He stood by her side, looking at the downcast, curly head.

She was such a little thing, and he was immensely tempted to bend down suddenly and press his lips upon her neck, just where the dark tendrils of hair shaded into down. Yes, he could do that, reconquer her.

He thought, "Can't go on like this. Must say something." But he could not find anything to say; all active ideas were in him obliterated by his blind desire to obtain once more from her the caresses which would make him forget.

Still Patricia did not move; her attitude suggested that she was worn out, that she had lived that day in a turmoil of excitement which her slight physique and her emotional experience were unfit to meet. The attitude was so pronounced that Rodbourne understood it. The girl was exhausted, but now it was not pity that he felt, nor protective desire; it pleased him to think that he had brought her to this point, that it was love for him reduced her; his understanding made her his.

So, as if to concentrate his triumph, to make it manifest to himself, he suddenly gave way to that temptation. Throwing his arms round the slim body he pressed his lips just where he had aimed his eyes—upon the slim bent neck.

As the first physical excitement passed away he expected her either to struggle or to respond, but not to stay, her head still bent, her hands still unstirred, as if she were saying to him, "Kiss me if you want to; it doesn't matter."

His male pride revolted against this. Needing to affirm himself he drew her to her feet, and holding her close tried to reach her lips. But here the distraction of innocence intervened; Patricia drew back as if afraid and turned her head away.

"Why not?" he whispered.

"Don't. Let me go. Please."

"I won't let you go. Not now. Or ever."

"Let me go, please. You know you don't mean it." Her voice was so cold that he released her. But as she made a movement toward the door he intercepted her. Now, indeed, he wanted her, and was certain that he must not let her go; if she went now she went entirely. The girl stopped, looked at him without fear, made safe by the hardness of youth. "Please, don't do that," she said. "I want to go."

He snatched her hand. "Look here," he said. "I'm not surprised you're angry. It's my fault. I was a fool this morning. But I want you to marry me."

She stared at him. Then, after a pause, "I don't believe it."

"But, good heavens, why not? Is it because I kissed you before"——

"Of course, it isn't that. Only, you don't love me."

"Yes, I do," said Rodbourne. "I'm asking you to marry me. Don't you understand?"

"Do you love me?"

"Of course I love you. Aren't you going to answer me?"

She hesitated. Already he had great power over her—this tall, fair man—but she was suspicious of something she could not define; something stood between and separated them. She did not know what it was, but her instinct, the unconscious observations she must have made during the week, all these held the two apart. He was not moving her, and all she wanted was to get away. But suddenly Rodbourne said in a new, veiled voice, "And you? Do you love me?"

At these words for which she was unprepared, a sudden terror came over the girl.

For a moment she stood there in conflict. Then, as she acknowledged to herself her degrading state, an immense pity for herself seized her. Flinging herself upon the sofa she wept, hiding her eyes with one hand and searching stupidly for her handkerchief.

Rodbourne flung his arms round her, murmuring words of comfort, of apology and love. Now and then he forgot his sympathy to cover with kisses the flushed cheek, to seek the lips that did not resist: he tried to tear from the weeping eyes the trembling hand. When she had ceased to cry, again he strove to force her promise, but Patricia was exhausted and would not answer him.

He realized at last that if he tortured her any more he would only bring on another fit of tears. So, in a good-humored tone, he said, "Look here, I don't know what's the matter; you're upset, but it's all right, isn't it?" She did not reply. "You do understand it'll be all right, don't you?" She nodded. "Well, I won't trouble you any more. We're all going back to-morrow May I come and see you there?"

"If you like."

"All right. I suppose we'd better go back." As she got up he took her hand, hesitating for a moment, but her frightened eyes forbade an embrace, so he raised her hand to his lips and for a second considered the thin, rosy fingers. She remained calm, only half-conscious that he was going to kiss her hand. But as he gently turned it palm upward, and there in its warm, scented hollow pressed a heavy caress, as he molded her lax fingers about his chin her childish coldness revolted and she pulled her hand away.

It was on impulse, because he had not at the moment been able to let her go, that Rodbourne had asked leave to call on Patricia in town. Just then, with his emotions stirred, he had just wanted to see her again by herself, to make her understand and to gain her. He was surprised when, a few days later, he found himself involved in an ordinary courtship. He did not perceive it at first, for the day he came to tea at the house in Old Quebec street, which Mrs. Neale had taken for three months, another man was already there, and later several people came in.

He had no chance to talk to Patricia, because her mother left her to do the pouring out for the small party. Indeed, Mrs. Neale quite embarrassed him by devoting to him too much personal attention. For Mrs. Neale was only thirty nine and still very pretty, slim brunette, quite unlike her daughter, more vivacious and far better dressed.

All these facts were forced upon Rodbourne because he was no longer the enthusiastic young man who saw perfection only in the

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